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ABSTRACT

While research examining altruism has relied on subject responses to written vignettes rather than actual altruism-eliciting situations, the relationship between written responses and actual behavior has not been established. To assess the degree to which some classic social/psychological behavior results could be replicated using short, written vignettes, 82 college women responded to 12 vignettes replicating 3 behavioral experiments (Piliavin, 1969, the subway experiment; Berkowitz and Daniel, 1963, recipient dependency and awareness of donor's help; and Austin, 1979, victim and thief). Responses to the vignettes clearly replicated the behavioral studies. Results showed that deserving, ill victims received more help judgments than potentially drunk victims (Piliavin, 1969). Berkowitz and Daniel's 1960 results were similarly replicated, with the interaction of awareness and dependency marginally significant. Finally, Austin's 1979 results were replicated, with woman victim/woman thief receiving more interventions than male victim/male thief. The results indicate that adult responses to written representations of environmental cues are much the same as the responses to actual situations produced in the original research. (JAC)

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The Utility of Vignette Judgment Tasks and Their Relationship to Past
Behavioral Data

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Several researchers examining altruism have relied upon subject responses to written vignettes rather than to actual altruism eliciting situations. Written presentation of cues for altruism offer at least 3 advantages, in addition to economy and convenience: They yield greater control over the determinants of altruism, they allow presentation of multiple determinants of altruism at prescribed levels (low amount vs high amount) and salience (non-obvious vs. obvious), and they provide the opportunity for the presentation of multiple helping situations. Psychologists have increasingly become interested in examining cross situational consistency and vignette judgment tasks. This interest requires the ability to present strongly controlled, repeated opportunities for altruism which vignettes can provide. However, the degree to which short written vignettes simulate actual environmental situations and the relationship between written responses and actual behavior has not been clearly established. The present study thus attempted to assess the degree to which some classic social psychological behavioral results could be replicated using short (5-6 sentences) written vignettes.

Method

Subjects. Eighty-two undergraduate women volunteered and received credit for participating in this study. Only one gender was utilized to limit the potential number of factors and interactions. Women were selected because they were in the majority in the class from which the subject pool was drawn.

Procedure. Twelve vignettes were constructed to replicate in writing as closely as possible the environmental stimuli presented to subjects in three classical social psychological experiments. For example, four stories described the conditions employed by the Piliavin et al. (1969) subway experiment. This study has also been replicated and utilized in vignette form by Weiner (1980) and the first two vignettes representing this experiment employed Weiner's description of the subject riding on a subway and seeing a victim collapse in the same subway car. The victim in one vignette was portrayed as holding a medical cane, in

the other as holding a bottle. Two subsequent stories portrayed the victims in the same situation as having either a medical I.D. bracelet or a flask in their back pocket. Subjects were asked to indicate what they would do in the situation on a 1 (immediately rush forward and give complete help) to 5 (not help) scale.

Four vignettes also represented the four complete crossed conditions in Berkowitz and Daniel's (1963) Experiment 2 which examined recipient dependency and recipient awareness of the donor's help. The four vignettes described the subject as being involved in making boxes (the task used in the original study) within a shoe store, office, pizza parlor, and florist shop where the subject's supervisor was eligible for a prize. In two of the vignettes, the prize was contingent only upon the notes written to the subjects by the supervisor and the subject had no opportunity to help the supervisor. In the other two vignettes the prize was contingent upon the notes and the number of boxes made by the subjects (thus the subject was able to influence the supervisor's prize). Subjects were asked to indicate how hard they would subsequently work on a 1 (much harder than usual) to 5 (less harder than usual) scale after finding out about the supervisors possible prize. Thus, the factors in the original research, including dependency (the degree to which the donor was able to have impact on the recipient's prize) and awareness (whether the recipient would know of the help or not) were replicated.

Finally, four vignettes provided description of only four of the sixteen completely crossed conditions employed in Austin's (1979) Experiment 3. The subject was described as reading in a hall outside a University classroom and having either a male or female student ask the subject to watch over his or her materials, which consisted either of a folder of notes or a folder of notes and expensive calculator. As the subject continued to read and the possible victim walked away down the hall, the vignette described a woman or a man who

came up to the belongings, looked around to see if he or she was being watched, and then picked up the belongings and begin to slowly leave with them. The conditions replicated in the four vignettes were a female victim, female thief, folder only stolen; female victim, female thief, calculator and folder stolen; male victim, male thief, folder only stolen; male victim, male thief, calculator and folder stolen. These four conditions did not completely cross victim and thief gender as Austin did but were selected as representative of Austin's major conclusions, that both gender and cost influenced interventions in an emergency. Subjects were asked to indicate on a 1 (immediately ask if it is their property) to 5 (not interact with the person) scale how they would respond to the theft. Thus, the studies selected for replications dealt with cost and competence, need and deservedness, and gender.

The vignettes were ordered in a series such that a Piliavin et al. vignette was presented first, then a Berkowitz and Daniel's replication story, then an Austin vignette, and then the order was repeated. This prevented any two vignettes on the same topic being ordered back to back. The particular experimental condition within the replications was randomly determined.

Results. The answers to the vignettes clearly replicated the behavioral studies. Like Piliavin et al. in 1969, we found that deserving ill victims received more help judgments than potentially drunk victims. Similarly, Berkowitz and Daniel's 1969 results were replicated with the dependency of the recipient on the subject's making boxes having a much larger impact on making boxes and the victim's awareness of the help having a smaller impact. The latter results was only marginally significant ($p < .10$) in the original research, which had far less statistical power and focus on awareness than the present experiment. The interaction of awareness and dependency was marginally significant in both the original (at the .08 level) and the present (at the .11 level) experiment, with the victim's awareness making little difference when dependency was low and more difference when was high.

Finally, Austin's (1979) results were replicated with woman victim/woman thief yielding more interventions than the male victim/male thief and with more intervention when cost to the victim was high rather than low.

Discussion. The results from the vignette replications suggest that adult responses to written representations of environmental cues produced much the same conclusions as responses to the actual situations used in the original research. In some cases, the economy of the vignette method may allow a larger number of subjects to be included, the focus on the experimental variables may be clearer, and the intrusion of interfering variables could be minimized. Moreover, a single subject could be exposed to multiple situations so that intrasubject consistency might be assessed, a difficult feat in both original laboratory and field research.

It is not suggested here that vignette judgments should replace behavioral data. It may not be possible to replicate in a short vignette, all of the three dimensional cues presented in a behavioral study, just as it may not be possible to inject the environmental richness of a field study into a laboratory setting. Slight changes in aspects of the environment would be anticipated to influence exactly how, when, and where help is offered. However, the important aspect of such research is not the ability to predict exactly how subjects would help at exactly what degree of rapidity, but rather the ability to evaluate the relative effects of the different levels of the determinants on subject's altruism. The vignettes offer many advantages to the analysis of altruism, and at least for the variables employed in this manuscript, the vignettes produced the same basic effects for gender, competence, cost need and deservedness as past behavioral studies. Laboratory studies have long been accepted as a reasonable compromise between experimental control and real world relevance, and are a useful adjunct to field research. Vignette judgment tasks may fulfill a similar adjunct function in future research.

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